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Arthur B. Evans

### The Apocalyptic Science Fiction of Jacques Spitz

Jacques Spitz (1896-1963), the most important French author of science fiction from the 1930s and 40s, wrote a number of sf novels that are definitely worth rediscovering today. Along with José Moselli and Régis Messac, Spitz belonged to the second generation of post-Jules Verne sf writers in France. They followed in the footsteps of J.-H. Rosny aîné, Gustave Le Rouge, and Maurice Renard, whose own pioneering tales were part of a “Golden Age” of early French sf from the 1890s through the first decades of the twentieth century. In the history of French science fiction, these two generations of post-Verne writers are especially notable because they were the first to turn their backs on the more conservative and didactic Vernian narrative model of extraordinary voyages—continued in the works of a number of “Verne School” writers such as Paul d’Ivoi, Maurice Champagne, and Louis Boussenard—and to opt instead for a more Wellsian brand of sf featuring alien life forms, alternate dimensions, and other highly speculative topics. Spitz and his contemporaries, in reaction to the horrors of the Great War and the social and political conflicts of the 1920s, were also among the first to infuse their work with a tone of dark pessimism and anti-scientism that characterizes the sf of certain later French writers such as René Barjavel. Serge Lehman, for example, classifies Spitz in the history of French sf as the *chaînon manquant* [the missing link] between Maurice Renard and René Barjavel (1238). Jean-Marc Lofficier describes Spitz’s sf as “tragicomic satire on a cosmic scale” (“Introduction” 5). And Jacques Sadoul calls him “le dernier écrivain important de romans scientifiques de l’avant-guerre” (408) [the last important writer of scientific novels before the (Second World) war]. Laboring in the giant shadow of Jules Verne, all of these *fin-de-siècle* and early twentieth-century sf authors should be recognized as the founders of the French *roman d’anticipation* [anticipation novel], a genre which only much later adopted the Anglophone label of *la science-fiction* in the 1960s.

Before discussing Jacques Spitz’s sf novels, it would perhaps be useful to talk a little about his life. But a little it must sadly be. No published or unpublished biography exists for Spitz and, because he was an intensely private person, not a great deal is known about him. His family came from the Alsace and Burgundy regions of France. He was born in 1896 in Nemours (now Ghazaouet), Algeria, where his father—a career military officer—was stationed. Jacques had three brothers: one died very young during World War I, one became a naval officer, and one entered the Church to become a Dominican monk. Jacques was an excellent student, completed his university studies in Paris at the prestigious École Polytechnique, and became an engineering consultant—a “day job” with which he would stay for his entire life. He joined the French military in World War I, served again as an artillery captain in World War II, and eventually earned the award of Chevalier de la Légion

d'Honneur for his service to his country. During the late 1920s, Spitz began to write fiction and devote himself to philosophy and literature. He was strongly influenced by Immanuel Kant, Paul Valéry, Luigi Pirandello, and especially by Surrealism. Traces of the latter can be seen in his pessimism, his taste for contradiction, his trenchant irony, and the black humor that often permeates his stories. It is also visible in the title of a play *Ceci est une drame* [This is a Drama, 1947]—an obvious spin-off from René Magritte's 1929 painting "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" [This Is Not a Pipe]—as well as in some of his early non-sf experimental novels such as *La Croisière indécise* [The Indecisive Cruise, 1926], *Le Vent du monde* [The Wind of the World, 1928], *Le Voyage muet* [The Silent Journey, 1930], and *Les Dames de velours* [The Velvet Ladies, 1933]. Jacques Spitz lived his entire adult life as a bachelor in central Paris in a large apartment on the Île Saint-Louis. Noted French sf writer, editor, and 2005 SFRA Pilgrim-award winner Gérard Klein—who met Spitz once or twice and whose publishing house Laffont produced a handsome reprint edition of two novels by Spitz in 1972—described him as deeply misanthropic. One of Spitz's best friends, Bernard Echassériaux (who died in January 2010), said that Spitz preferred to "vivre dans la mesure du possible, par profond scepticisme, hors de tout engrenage social" [to live as much as possible, due to his deep scepticism, far outside the normal social grind] ("L'Univers" 13). He also characterized him as a fascinating individual who had a "rich imagination" and a "soaring intelligence," who was naturally attracted to off-beat situations, and who strongly disliked televisions in restaurants, ostentation of any kind, and people who wasted his time. Finally, he noted Spitz's sometimes quirky and contradictory personality as someone "qui méprisait les honneurs, [mais qui] avait et portait 'le ruban rouge.' Glorifiant l'oisiveté ... [mais qui] a laissé ... un journal intime de 6,000 pages" [who disdained honorifics, yet accepted and wore 'the red ribbon' (as a member of the French Legion of Honor). He glorified idleness ... yet left behind a personal diary of over 6,000 pages] ("Postface" 190). Jacques Spitz died quietly in Paris in 1963 at the age of 67.

The sf novels by Spitz that appeared during his lifetime were published as *romans fantastiques* [fantastic novels]—again demonstrating to what extent the generic label of "science fiction" had not yet become a viable literary term in France during the 1930s and 40s. In this regard, it is interesting to look at some of the rejection letters that Spitz received from publishers when trying to place his manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> Reading them, one can clearly see how the French publishing industry had difficulty in accommodating this brand of narrative. For example, in the early 1930s, when Spitz was seeking to publish his first sf novel, *L'Agonie du globe* [Sever the Earth]—a geological apocalypse story about the Earth breaking into two parts—one French publisher turned him down saying, "Your book is ingenious, but we fear that its very character will prevent it from appealing to a sufficiently large number of readers, and that it will not have the publication success we would normally hope for" (Éditions A. Fayard, 21 Dec. 1931). Another publisher accompanied its rejection letter with a copy of an outside reader's report that was even more explicit:

There is, of course, much imagination in this ‘anticipation’ type of novel, where the author describes the horrifying splitting in two of the Earth; and there is also much remarkable scientific documentation. But, for the general public, this book has a basic flaw that will prevent it from being a success. It is a long narrative without any central characters, a scientific narrative instead of novelistic one, a description of possible catastrophes instead of a human story told in the context of a catastrophe. As such, the book leaves one cold. (Reader report for Editions Alphone LeMerre, Feb. 1932)

In this report, one hears echoes of what some literary critics initially said about Jules Verne’s *romans scientifiques*:

A notable contribution to the crudities and figments afloat in current conversation may be traced to the writings of Jules Verne.... [E]very vivacious young man can quote them and impart to his discourse a scientific glimmer which resembles knowledge as the phosphorescence of decayed bones resembles a calcium light. The astonishing vogue of these productions constitutes their chief claim to criticism, but they may also be said to challenge it by a special eminence in worthlessness.... [T]he process of the artist and the teacher, which [such] didactic fiction seeks to confound, are essentially incapable of fusion ... the scientific romance is an impertinence. (Hazelvine 342)

Spitz’s *L’Agonie du globe* did eventually find a publishing home (with the major publishing house of Gallimard), and it sold quite well. The same cannot be said, however, about Spitz’s final sf novel called *Guerre mondiale #3* [World War Three], a near-future tale of nuclear war between the US and the USSR, which remained unpublished until 2009. Most of the rejection letters for this novel cite the same well-worn excuse: i.e., that the publisher lacked a “line of scientific, adventure, or anticipation novels ... [and] our present financial situation simply does not permit us to consider creating one at this time” (A. Sabatier of Éditions Albin Michel, 1 Dec. 1947) or “It is unfortunately not the opportune moment for us to be considering starting a new line of fantastic novels” (Georges Lambriche, Éditions de Minuit, 1 Nov. 1948) or “In the final analysis, we simply cannot take up this project for which we are not suitably equipped” (Roland Laudenbach, Éditions La Table Ronde, 16 Mar. 1950). But there was one publisher who, ironically, rejected the novel because it seemed *too real*, especially given the growing Cold War tensions of the time between the US and the Soviet Union:

Given the current political atmosphere, it is not possible for us to publish your novel. Despite its fictional character, the events it describes are too plausible. Publishing your story would no doubt bring down upon us the rightful wrath of the public, who are already very much alarmed by these dark days. (P. Calmann-Levy of Éditions Calmann-Levy, 12 April 1948)

Most of Spitz’s sf does tend to be dark and pessimistic and has been classified by at least one critic as “catastrophist SF” (Gouanvic, *La Science-fiction* 135, 144). For example, his first novel, the aforementioned *L’Agonie du globe* (1935, translated as *Sever the Earth*—the only work by Spitz that was translated into English during his lifetime), portrays an Earth that, because of cataclysmic internal geological forces, breaks up into two separate planetary

bodies—one containing North and South America and most of the Pacific and the other containing Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia. Despite massive earthquakes, gigantic tsunamis, and widespread global devastation, humanity survives. But the fragment of Earth containing the Americas slowly drifts into the orbit of the Moon, crashes into it, and is entirely obliterated. (So much for Spitz's not-so-subtle commentary on the value of American culture.) The plot may seem far-fetched and rather superficial for an end-of-the-world story, but what makes Spitz's narration especially effective is his meticulous attention to detail and his bitingly satiric humor. For example, here is a passage describing the effects of the new half-planet's suddenly diminished gravitation and air pressure:

The air was much lighter; barometers only registered 21 inches. This resulted in a massacre among cardiac and asthmatic sufferers but, on the other hand, patients with tuberculosis suddenly improved....

Those most satisfied with this new state of affairs were the children. They jumped about in the public gardens and parks with an agility which would have shocked their grandparents. They took standing jumps for the fun of it over shrubs and fountains, much to the park-keepers' despair....

It goes without saying that the lowering of barometric pressure was even more severe in high altitudes. It became impossible to make the ascent of Mont Blanc, and the last two Alpinists who attempted it went to their deaths.... All the villages located in the high valleys were now depopulated. It was learned one day that the Buddhist monasteries of Tibet, which their Lamas and their living Buddhas had refused to evacuate, were now inhabited only by corpses. They had all perished from asphyxiation, a new form of Nirvana. (*Sever* 113-15)

Another such “thought experiment” is featured in Spitz's 1938 sf novel *L'Homme élastique* [The Elastic Man], in which a French scientist named Dr. Flohr has discovered a way to enlarge or shrink the atoms of human beings by means of a high-tech electro-magnetic beam—similar to the device portrayed in the popular movie *Honey, I Shrank the Kids* (1989). As Flohr's invention becomes known, people from all over the world come to him clamoring to change their size: men and women to please their lovers by becoming taller or more petite; athletes in order to have an edge over their competition; factory workers to adapt their size to the machines they operate; doctors to miniaturize themselves to do surgery more effectively deep inside the human body; and even Army generals to shrink their soldiers to Lilliputian size to better infiltrate the enemy's defenses or to expand them so much that they will be lighter than air and serve as living spy dirigibles. Predictably, national governments soon begin to pass a myriad of “size” regulations. The USSR, for instance, decides that, in the tradition of Peter the Great, all Russian citizens will henceforth be no less than 4 meters tall. The Parliament of Great Britain passes a new law forbidding entry into the British Isles by anyone who is not of “normal” English size. And Hitler's Third Reich in Germany adopts a “race-based” policy on the question of a person's height, issuing the following official proclamation:

After meticulous and extensive study of this matter in the laboratories of the Empire under the direction of the Ministry for Race Improvement, the

government has decided that the German race will adhere to a fixed range of sizes available through this atom elasticity process. The dimensions adopted must strictly conform to the those prescribed in the following Articles:

Article 1. The Führer will be 6 meters tall.

Article 2. The Cabinet Ministers, General of the Armies of the Reich, Commandant of the Storm Troopers, and all German Ambassadors will all be 4 meters tall.

Article 3. Each German citizen, upon reaching his age of majority, will be made 2½ meters tall, the official German size.

Article 4. By special dispensation and in the spirit of religious tolerance, all Catholics will be allowed to maintain their current height.

Article 5. No Jew will be allowed to be taller than 10 centimeters. (171-72)

(One delightful aspect of reading Spitz's novels dating from the late 1930s is that they occasionally include derogatory references to Hitler and Goebbels from Nazi Germany, to Mussolini from Fascist Italy, and to other notable historical and political figures of his time.)

Also in 1938, Spitz published one of his finest sf works, *La Guerre des mouches* [The War of the Flies], an apocalyptic thriller depicting how these insects one day unexpectedly mutate, develop intelligence, declare war on humans, defeat them, and become the dominant species on Earth. Perhaps modeled on H.G. Wells's 1905 short story "The Empire of the Ants," Spitz's tale is told from the point of view of one of the surviving members of the human species who are now being preserved by the flies in a kind of zoo. This narrator tells in great detail how humanity is both outsmarted and overwhelmed by these ever-evolving insects. Certain passages such as the following highlight the story's relentlessly grim Voltairian humor:

[T]he Catholic Church had not yet taken sides in this controversial question concerning the flies' intelligence.... Some writers went so far as to claim that if they were intelligent, they probably also had souls! This new and outrageous heresy, known as Vandellism from the name of a certain Father Vandelle who ... had been the first to propose the idea, was promptly condemned by the Church. But it nevertheless had many believers among the people.

"If the flies have the gift of intelligence," insisted these disciples of Father Vandelle, "then we should not fight them or declare war on them, which is contrary to our religious beliefs. Instead, we should be trying to evangelize them! ... Let us be guided by that wonderful Christian icon that, for centuries, has brought tears to the eyes of our faithful: the image of Saint Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds. We should be preaching to these insects...."

The Vatican in Rome, of course, simply ignored such opinions. But in Anglo-Saxon countries this call to spread the Gospel was answered, and the Salvation Army decided to send to Morocco its first missionary team composed of two pastors, three assistants to distribute Bibles, a dozen sisters of Jesus Christ, and a small portable pipe organ. They all came ashore at Casablanca. One month later, only the organ could be found. It was lying 200 meters from the dock. Its pipes were not edible by the larva. (109-10)

This bleak Darwinian tale—reminiscent of Rosny's *La Mort de la terre* [The Death of the Earth, 1910]—can also be viewed as a piece of cautionary political

prophesying: i.e., a metaphorical warning about the rise of Nazism in Germany during the late 1930s and the weakness of France and England in responding to its increasing aggressions.<sup>2</sup>

Immediately after the war, in 1945, Spitz published a visionary sf novel that many critics have called his masterpiece, *L'Oeil du purgatoire* [The Eye of Purgatory, trans. Stableford, 2010]. The story is narrated by a down-and-out artist named Poldonski whose paintings have received no public recognition and who is on the verge of committing suicide. He encounters a rogue scientist from the Pasteur Institute named Dr. Dagerlöff, who is looking for a human guinea pig on whom to test a new bacterium he has developed. This bacterium, once injected into the optic nerve, will allow the human eye to see a few seconds into the future. With nothing left to live for, Poldonski volunteers to test the microbe and submits to the necessary procedure. Within hours, his vision begins to mutate, and he now sees everything around him not as it is but rather how it will become a few moments later. Dagerlöff describes this as a “journey into causality” where the subject is witnessing the present as it grows older. Poldonski does not travel through time; he is living within his same temporal reality. But his eyes see this reality not as it is but as it will be. His other senses are not affected—he can still hear, touch, and smell in sync with “normal” time—it is only his eyes that perceive differently, slightly in advance. At first, this temporal disjunction, measured by just a minute or two, is only mildly disorienting. For example, he finds it difficult to shave because the image of himself that he sees in the bathroom mirror is already clean-shaven. And when he holds a conversation with someone, the movements of their mouth and their facial gestures are out of sync with the words he hears, which arrive a bit later.

But his life begins to get seriously complicated when the temporal disjunction suddenly begins to accelerate, from minutes to days to weeks and then to years. Looking outdoors, he sees cadavers walking the streets, which before his eyes turn into skeletons and then mere clouds of dust. He must continually take Kodak photographs of his surroundings in order to know what they “really” look like since he can only see them as they will be years later.<sup>3</sup> In one especially fascinating passage, he even witnesses his own death:

This morning, my face in the mirror frightened me. I had to take a photo of myself to reassure myself: I'm a little thin, and my eyes are sunken in their orbits, but no grave symptom is visible in the snapshot. In the mirror, however, what a sight! I could believe that I'm looking at a mummy. The skin is clinging to the bony structure; the hair is sticking to the temples; wrinkles are hollowing out multiple parentheses on both sides of my mouth.... I can see myself aging with the naked eye, as in a speeded-up film.

Horror! I can see myself not only getting older, but dying! ...

Suddenly a real anguish grips me. My hand trembles, to the point at which I can't carry on writing—what if, once I'm dead, *I can no longer see anything?* The dead are plunged into eternal darkness. In a moment, since I shall be dead, I might go blind. An atrocious prospect! ...

It's the end; I sense it... My eyelids are no longer fluttering. The pupil dilates, dilates, opening on abyssal depths. My taut features relax. As abrupt as a blade, a veil falls before my eyes. I'm dying ... I'm dead ...

O joy! I can still see! (Stableford trans. 193-97; emphases in original)

The oxymoronic and “Valdemarian” overtones of this passage are noteworthy. Poldonski lives on after seeing his own death and describes his condition in the following terms (hence the novel's title): “It is, in a way, the eye of purgatory that I direct at the world from now on” (Stableford 199). He soon observes the future death of his mistress and can no longer bear to make love to her:

I no longer knew what I was thinking, but I took her in my arms and pressed my lips upon her firm, smooth face, flourishing with health and life ...

When I opened my eyes, I perceived with a shiver of horror that I was no longer holding anything in my arms but a corpse, her sides ultra-Baudelairean in their stickiness ...

Her cadaver with the vitreous eyes was no more appealing than a scarecrow. I sensed, brutally, that I would never play out the comedies of the living again. She raised her arm in order to caress my hair with her hand. I recoiled abruptly.

“One might think that I scared you.”

One owes the dead the truth. Unblinkingly, I replied: “No, you horrify me.”

With the staring eyes of a cadaver she shot me a glance—oh, what a glance! But I sustained the shock, as with a sword. Hatred seemed to strike sparks in the silence. The dead treat each other harshly. Unceremoniously, I commanded: “Go away!”

She got up abruptly, as if stung by a whiplash. She didn't say a word; she left.

If she had demanded an explanation, my reply was ready: “I too want a living lover.” (Stableford trans. 207-08)

Poldonski's symptoms continue to increase in speed. From years and decades, his temporal perception now extends to centuries and millennia. Soon he is viewing the world in a far-distant future inhabited only by animate “forms,” the eternal remains of human desires, sentiments, and hopes after humanity itself has perished. The narrator, ironically feeling his own transient mortality, exclaims “Oh! why have I not thought, felt and loved better? ... Why has my life been so poor?” (Stableford trans. 227). In the conclusion of the novel, his future vision eventually includes the death of the solar system, the extinction of the Sun, and a final encounter with one last “form”—the image of himself as others have seen him throughout his life, the only self which truly endures. His journey is over, and his last words are: “I understand. I understand everything: I am going to die, and that is my soul, awaiting me on the threshold of eternity” (Stableford trans. 238). It is a very Existentialist conclusion to a novel that expertly weaves together diverse elements of universal entropy, post-Surrealist irony, and the omnipresence of death and decay.

A few words should be said about Spitz's sf short stories, many of which remain unpublished to this day. The majority of them were written *after* his novels—during the late 1940s and 1950s—and a few seem decidedly un-Spitzian in their subject matter and tonality. Most, such as “Après l'ère atomique” [After



the Atomic Era], “Le Nez de Cléopâtre” [Cleopatra’s Nose], “La Peste mimétique” [The Mimetic Plague], and “Interview d’une soucoupe volante” [Interview with a Flying Saucer], continue to depict catastrophist scenarios where humanity is either wiped out, rendered completely homogeneous, or reduced to being a highly prized food source for Earth’s alien conquerors. Some are future-war stories, such as “Bataille navale atomique” [Atomic Navy Battle] and “La Machine à finir la guerre” [The Machine to End War], where the author’s political cynicism continues to be on full display. But there are several other short stories, such as “Amours en l’an 4000” [Love in the Year 4000], “Sports de printemps sur Vénus” [Spring Sports on Venus], “La Planète des femmes invisibles” [The Planet of Invisible Women] and “La Machine à fabriquer les femmes” [The Machine to Manufacture Women], that focus on questions of romantic love, extraterrestrial sex, and “fully functional” female androids—all narrated in a tone that is surprisingly light-hearted and mercurial, but also unremittingly sexist. For example, when the sales manager of the android factory is asked why they produce only female androids, he replies “We have not yet been able to synthesize intelligence. For a man, some intellect is necessary. For a woman, it’s different” (175). Or consider the following passage, where this same sales manager is explaining his product’s “operating instructions” to a new customer:

“During the first few days, be sure to keep her on a leash or hold her hand when you go out in public until she becomes sufficiently used to you,” advised the salesman. “If, after this breaking-in period, she exhibits any defect whatever, we will replace her for you. And please do not forget that these synthetic girls are not protected under the law like normal women are, even though their exterior appearance is identical. When you grow tired of her, you can sell her on the second-hand market, trade her in for a new model, or have her put down. It’s entirely your choice. You can beat her and even chop her up into little pieces if you wish, without breaking the law....” (176)

One last word on the persistent pessimism that pervades Spitz’s sf: in many respects, the negative tone of these stories reflects the social ambiance of the *entre-deux-guerres* period in France where the horrors of World War I—in which over two million French were killed or crippled—had left deep scars in the national psyche. The technological optimism and confidence in scientific progress that had been popularized since the 1860s by writers such as Jules Verne, Albert Robida, and Paul d’Ivoi now lay shattered in the poison-gassed trenches of Alsace and the bombed-out ruins of Verdun. Among the French public, a sense of despair and revolt fueled new anti-establishment cultural movements such as Dada and Surrealism. Literary fiction offering positive portrayals of science and technology was suddenly very much out of favor, and the number of publishing outlets for it diminished rapidly. In the words of one sf historian, “By the end of the 1920s, just as Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories* was preparing to bloom on the other side of the Atlantic, the Golden Age of French science fiction had effectively ended” (Lofficier, *French Science Fiction* 362). Nurtured in the 1920s and writing in the 1930s and early 1940s—those turbulent years just before and after World War II—Jacques

Spitz's sf exemplifies the tenor of his times. As such, he may have been among the last of those purely French sf writers before the genre was transformed (or ideologically highjacked, as some have argued) by the sudden and massive influx of American sf into the French cultural marketplace during the postwar years of the 1950s.<sup>4</sup>

#### NOTES

1. These personal letters and other unpublished materials on and by Spitz can be found in the "Fonds Jacques Spitz" at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, France. All translations from the French are my own unless otherwise attributed.

2. See Gouanvic, *La Science-fiction française* (145-49).

3. Such unforeseen complications are at the heart of many sf works about "enhanced vision" such as H.G. Wells's "The Remarkable Case of Davidson's Eyes" and Rosny's "Un Autre monde" [Another World] (both published in 1895), Maurice Renard's 1921 novel *L'Homme truqué* [The Altered Man], Edmond Hamilton's "The Man with the X-Ray Eyes" (1933), and Roger Corman's *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* (1963).

4. For more on this "second American invasion" of France by Anglophone sf, see Evans (260-61) and the detailed analyses by Gouanvic in his *La Science-fiction française* (167-78) and *Sociologie de la traduction*.

#### ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SF BY JACQUES SPITZ

Sf novels (most of which were published as *romans fantastiques* [fantastic novels]), listed in chronological order:

*L'Agonie du globe* [The Agony of the Globe] (Paris: Gallimard, 1935) - Rpt. Paris: Septimus, 1977. Published in English as *Sever the Earth* (trans. Margaret Mitchiner, illus. Denis Tegetmeir), London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1936. As a result of catastrophic geological forces, the Earth splits into two parts. Despite widespread devastation, humanity manages to survive. One of the two fragments of Earth then drifts into the orbit of the Moon where it is destroyed.

*Les Évadés de l'an 4000* [Escapees from the Year 4000] (Paris: Gallimard, 1936) - Rpt. Paris: Gallimard, 1948. Due to disturbances in the Sun's energy patterns, the entire Earth has entered a new Ice Age, profoundly transforming the social and political life of humanity. Africa becomes the only habitable continent, and all human civilization has been forced underground. In the year 4000, humanity lives in huge underground cities under the strict dictatorship of a scientific ruling elite which forbids visiting the surface of the planet. The hero of the story, a rogue scientist who believes that humanity's only hope is to colonize other planets, manages to launch a rocket into space. He is immediately arrested and imprisoned (ironically, on the island of Saint Helena), but he is soon released after the government is overthrown in a popular revolt. Declared president of the United States of the World, the scientist is eventually responsible for sending a spaceship of human colonists to the planet Venus.

*L'Homme élastique* [The Elastic Man] (Paris: Gallimard, 1938) - Rpt. Verviers, Belgium: Marabout, 1974; in *Joyeuses Apocalypses*, Paris: Bragelonne, 2009. A French scientist named Doctor Flohr finds a way to compress or expand the atom—a technology that allows him to shrink human bodies to microscopic size or to enlarge them into giants. He decides to market his "Flohrization" process and it becomes an instant hit worldwide. Everybody wants to use it: generals to enhance their armies, medical doctors to facilitate their treatment of bacterial infections, couples to have a better "fit" with their partners, athletes to improve their performance, etc. Soon

the entire world is transformed as humanity embraces this new technology and its potential to evolve them into a super-species. But the cost is high and many traditional human values and cultural practices are no longer socially relevant, including art, music, athletics, heroism, even love.

*La Guerre des mouches* [The War of the Flies] (Paris: Gallimard, 1938) - Rpt. Verviers, Belgium: Marabout, 1970; Paris: Ombres, 1997; and in *Joyeuses Apocalypses*, Paris: Bragelonne, 2009. Translated into Spanish as *La Guerra de las Moscas* (Mexico: Cima, 1939). "Following a mutation, flies attack and conquer humanity through their larger numbers, higher intelligence, and rigorous discipline. The story is told from the viewpoint of a surviving human who has been kept by the victorious diptera as a specimen in a reservation, together with an erstwhile dictator, a pope, and other characteristic examples of the late human species. An ironic, almost prophetic pre-WWII parable" (Jakubowski 429).

*L'Expérience du Dr. Mops* [The Experiment of Dr. Mops] (Paris: Gallimard, 1939) - Rpt. Paris: Laffont, 1972. Translated/adapted into English by Brian Stableford as *Dr. Mops' Experiment*, Encino, CA: Black Coat Press, 2010. This short novel is Spitz's first treatment of the theme of temporally displaced perception that will appear in more expanded form in his more famous 1945 novel *L'Oeil du purgatoire* [The Eye of Purgatory]. Here, a scientist named Dr. Mops has succeeded in accelerating cell growth in the part of the cerebral cortex of the human brain that controls the organization of memory. The result is that the subject who has been operated on, although living in the present, perceives everything around him as it will be in the future.

*La Parcelle "Z"* [The "Z" Particle] (Marseille: Vigneau, 1942). The scientist-industrialist Blandin is a master of "bioelectrics" and "pharmacobiology." Among his other discoveries, he has developed a kind of "living metal" called *argénium* which, when animated with a few human cells, allows one to monitor the movements of the person whose cells are used through a kind of electrico-magnetic display indicating the movement of that person's "particle" on a map. A young man named Bernard Desmaisons, a lab assistant to Blandin, marries Cécile, Blandin's ward, and begins to track her comings and goings through the movement of her "Z particle" on the screen. Cécile dies unexpectedly, but her "Z particle" continues to live and ultimately leads Desmaisons to Blandin's pregnant daughter where it remains until the birth of the baby. Desmaisons adopts the child as his own, convinced that the baby contains the essence of Cécile's reincarnated soul. An unusual amalgam of genres, this novel is part detective story, part love story, part occultism and spiritualism, part futuristic technology, and part scientific extrapolation.

*Les Signaux du soleil* [Signals from the Sun] (Marseille: Vigneau, 1943) - Rpt. in *Chasseurs de Chimère: l'âge d'or de la science-fiction française*, ed. Serge Lehman, Paris: Omnibus, 2006. Martian and Venusian prospectors begin to "mine" the Earth's atmosphere for its oxygen and nitrogen, creating huge atmospheric disturbances across the planet. They are unaware that the Earth is home to intelligent life. A young human astrophysicist, the hero of the tale, figures out a way to communicate with these extraterrestrial entrepreneurs by ionizing the atmosphere in such a way as to communicate the number "pi" (3.1416). The Martians and Venusians, as advanced morally as they are scientifically, realize their error and immediately stop their extraction operations. An unusually optimistic novel by Spitz.

*L'Oeil du purgatoire* [The Eye of Purgatory] (Paris: Nouvelle France, 1945) - Rpt. Paris: Laffont, 1972; Paris: Presse Pocket, 1980; Paris: Ed. L'Arbre vengeur, 2008. Translated into English by Brian Stableford as *The Eye of Purgatory*, Encino, CA:

Black Coat Press, 2010. “A mad scientist isolates a bacillus that lives a few seconds ahead of present time and inoculates a painter with it. The unfortunate man thus becomes capable of seeing the future in a most extreme form: when he sees a child, at first he sees it as an adult and then, as the illness progresses, as a skeleton. Life becomes a nightmare as he keeps moving through a world of corpses. As his condition worsens, he walks through a universe of bones and dust until he finally witnesses the souls of people around him and, at last, his own soul, signifying the end of his ordeal, and his own death. A chilling and unique novel whose powerful theme has seldom been tackled elsewhere” (Jakubowski 429).

*Guerre mondiale #3* [World War Three] (published posthumously in *Joyeuses apocalypses*, 2009). A future historian tells of how the ongoing Cold War between the USSR and the USA in the twentieth century suddenly turned hot, igniting World War III. Russia invaded Western Europe and soon conquered all of Africa as well. After the destruction of Chicago by Communist A-bombs, the United States counter-attacked with nuclear weapons of its own and a host of other high-tech armaments (including chemical and biological agents and soldiers who had been preserved cryogenically for just such an eventuality). As the war progressed, the populations of the world were decimated. The carnage did not end until American scientists discovered a way to change the Earth’s axis (cf: Jules Verne’s *The Purchase of the North Pole* [1889]) and to make Moscow the new North Pole, burying it permanently under miles of ice. A future-war tale—or, from today’s perspective, a kind of alternate history—that is cynically pessimistic but that also features some very inventive extrapolations and much black humor.

*Alpha du Centaure* [Alpha Centauri] (According to Pierre Versins, this novel was in the process of being published in 1945, but all existing copies were destroyed when the publisher’s inventory was plundered by the occupying German army. The author’s original typewritten manuscript, however, is available in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris: NAF28099, MF 33646. Uncharacteristically for Spitz, this novel expands on his unpublished short story “Amours en l’an 4000” [Love in the Year 4000] and recounts a futuristic love story.) On the planet Gala in the Alpha Centauri system, the 22-year-old Terpène Cator is desperately attempting to reconnect with his ex-girlfriend Héra, who has just become the fiancée of his ex-friend Seldor. At the same time, diplomatic relations between the government of Gala and that of Siria (a planet in the nearby Sirius system) are rapidly deteriorating. Following the discovery of a strong telepathic link between lovers, Gala’s leaders decide to send half of ten loving couples to Siria as spies, to communicate back to their home planet telepathically. Héra and Seldor are selected for this duty, but Terpène (whose father is a powerful Galan politician) manages to have Héra sent to Earth instead. Using the captured Seldor as a test subject, the Sirian government develops a “love” bacteria with which they manage to infect all the inhabitants of both Gala and Earth—all the men fall madly in love with Héra and all the women with the Emperor of Siria. Worldwide love-sickness cripples Galan society, but Earth is largely unaffected, since most of its population had migrated to Venus hundreds of years earlier. Soon after, Seldor is killed on his journey to Earth, Héra undergoes a near-death experience herself, and Terpène and Héra rekindle their love and live happily ever after on an Earth that is slowly regressing back to its pre-technological natural state.

Sf short stories (many of which belong to an unpublished collection which Spitz titled *Nouvelles Fantastiques* [Fantastic Short Stories]):

- “Bataille navale atomique” [Atomic Navy Battle]. (Published in *Sel marin, l’humour dans la marine* [Paris: Marine Nationale, 1946]). Drone warfare against the Japanese in the South Pacific, where all the ships are manned by robots and the generals are controlling the movements of the fleet electronically using TV screens from a bunker buried deep beneath Washington, DC.
- “L’An 3000” [In The Year 3000]. (Published in *V-Magazine* 287 [11 juin 1950], illus. Guy Sabran.) Descriptions of a day in the life of a variety of individuals from the year 3000: a successful businessman, an airline flight attendant, a planetary miner, a light sculptor, and others. (Similar to Jules/Michel Verne’s “In the Year 2889” [1889].)
- “L’Enigme du V51” [The Enigma of V51]. (Published in *V-Magazine* 326 [7 janv. 1951], illus. Guy Sabran, and reprinted in *Joyeuses apocalypses* [2009], 381-90.) In the 21st century, astronauts in the rocket V51 arrive on the Moon and discover humans already living there—and they speak English! It seems the satellite had been colonized by Earthmen ten thousand years earlier.
- “Sports de printemps sur Vénus” [Spring Sports on Venus]. (Published in *V-Magazine* 445 [1951].) All Venusians are born as women; but at age thirty they become men. Male Earthlings who visit Venus’s unique vacation resorts can select both the type of female companion/guide they would prefer—according to height (large, medium, petite), body type (chubby, standard, “extra dry”), and temperament (sentimental, semi-passionate, passionate, fiery)—as well as their favorite sporting activity, from skiing on carbonic snow to jet-propelled sailboats.
- “La Planète des femmes invisibles” [The Planet of Invisible Women]. (Published in *V-Magazine* [c. 1951] and later reprinted in *Bulletin des Amateurs d’Anticipation Ancienne et de Littérature Fantastique* 4 [Oct. 1990].) Retired astronaut Patrick reminisces about visiting the small planet Azul, located near the star Alpha Centauri. There, all the local women are invisible and each is recognizable only by her unique, exquisite odor (fruit or flower). Patrick subsequently discovers that he can see them by shining a special infra-red flashlight on them and learns that all of them are, in truth, repulsively ugly!
- “Après l’ère atomique” [After the Atomic Era]. (Published posthumously in *Joyeuses apocalypses* [2009], 349-55.) An historian of the future tells of how humanity conquered the atom but in so doing inadvertently changed the very nature of the space-time continuum, causing the speed of light to slow down dramatically. Stars suddenly disappeared from the night sky, and sounds could now be heard before the events causing them could be seen (thunder preceded lightning, etc.). Human civilization came to a virtual standstill and the human species regressed to a vegetative state.
- “Le Nez de Cléopâtre” [Cleopatra’s Nose]. (Published posthumously in *Joyeuses apocalypses* [2009], 359-67.) The title refers to Pascal’s famous quote that “If Cleopatra’s nose had been a little shorter, the entire face of the world would have been different.” The scientist Esterdzis invents a substance that is able to instantaneously change large bodies of water into solid mud. He calls it “Cleopatra’s Nose.” To demonstrate its potency, he dries up the Mediterranean Sea. But he soon loses control over it, and all the oceans and rivers of Earth rapidly disappear one after another. Without water, humanity perishes.
- “Interview d’une soucoupe volante” [Interview with a Flying Saucer]. (Published posthumously in *Joyeuses apocalypses* [2009], 371-79.) Following the conquest of Earth by a powerful extraterrestrial race, the latter occupy only a small part of Europe, demand tribute of only a few humans per year, and allow the remainder of

humanity to live in relative freedom. A human reporter interviews the leader of the aliens and learns that Earth has been turned into a farm for the cultivation and export of human brains, considered to be a delicacy on the aliens' home planet. (Cf: Damon Knight's "To Serve Man" [1950].)

"Les Vacances du Martien" [The Martian's Vacation] (Published posthumously in *Joyeuses apocalypses* [2009], 393-99.) A Martian narrator describes his recent vacation on planet Earth. The world had been transformed into a gigantic amusement park for alien tourists, who can visit an underwater hotel in the English Channel, the ancient ruins of the American city of Nouille-Horque, floating atolls in the South Pacific (cf: Verne's 1895 novel *Propeller Island*), a miniaturized society in Japan, and even some very upscale bordellos in Paris.

"Le Secret des microbes" [The Secret of the Microbes]. (Published posthumously in *Joyeuses apocalypses* [2009], 403-14.) A misanthropic man in an insane asylum explains to his doctor how he has succeeded in communicating with a race of microbial bacteria, who are at perpetual war with homo sapiens. He offers his services to Science in its struggle against them. (A cross between Maupassant's "The Horla" [1887] and Renard's *L'Homme chez les microbes* [A Man Among the Microbes, 1928].)

"Amours en l'an 4000" [Love in the Year 4000]. In 3948, the specific microbe responsible for love (the "love bug") is discovered. It is found to be transmitted via a beam of light; it enters the body through the eyes and infects the entire organism. Entrepreneurs soon develop and market special filtering eyeglasses to guard against such infections as well as a new "Aphrodite pistol" that can shoot rays of light containing the germ. Fortunately, the microbes' effects can be easily cured through a simple cleansing of the victim's spinal column to remove any traces of the microbe.

"En 2047, le Réveillon sur Lunulette" [In 2047, The Christmas Eve Celebration on Lunulette]. A reporter meets the wealthy Rockefeller Junior in a bar on December 24. After a few drinks, the latter invites him (and a stripper named Lulu) to spend the evening with him celebrating on the artificial Earth satellite called Lunulette. After much partying, the reporter passes out and wakes up the next morning on the sidewalk of 42nd Street.

"Le Dictaphone" [The Dictaphone]. The businessman Mr. Fairborough examines the mysterious dictation recordings of his colleague Mr. Biggs, tapes which the latter had apparently made *after his death* weeks earlier. His colleague's office was equipped with a new type of dictation machine—which requires no speaking, directly recording the thoughts of the user. Biggs's family had stored his body in the office for several weeks before deciding where to bury him. During this time, the dictaphone continued to record the dead man's thoughts. (A new variant on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" [1845].)

"La Machine à fabriquer les femmes" [The Machine to Manufacture Women]. At the dawn of the 30th century, a reporter visits a new bio-factory that manufactures anatomically correct female androids. All are 17-year-old girls, are available in 24 different models, and have a character that, "rigorously determined by a judicious choice of chromosomes, makes them docile, cheerful, infinitely accommodating, and never talkative." The factory soon becomes extremely successful until it is destroyed by mobs of real women who protest the existence of their hi-tech rivals.

"La Machine à finir la guerre" [The Machine to End War]. The French scientist Georges Demuyter creates a set of detailed blueprints for a machine to end war. The British, Germans, and Russians attempt to steal them. Demuyter escapes to the United States, where a rich sausage magnate from Ohio agrees to fund his efforts. He begins

building his machine in the South Pacific, protected by the US Navy. The Japanese and Chinese attack the island before the machine can be completed. The European nations promptly declare war on Japan and China. Demuyter is ultimately killed, his machine is destroyed, and his plans are lost forever. The world's armies immediately stand down, and all fighting stops. Ironically, there is no longer any reason for conflict since all nations now retain the right to wage war.

“La Machine suprême-déetectrice” [The Supreme-Moment Detection Machine]. A machine is invented that can identify one's “supreme moment” in life—the specific time and place when a person's role in the universe is revealed and the *raison d'être* of one's life becomes clear. But there is a problem: the machine's printed results are extremely ambiguous and impossible to decipher in any meaningful way.

“La Peste mimétique” [The Mimetic Plague]. A new, highly contagious disease sweeps through the world's populations. Its symptoms are unique: in chameleon-like fashion, victims' bodies suddenly begin to imitate their surroundings. Soon everyone resembles everyone else. The disease then mutates to affect the human psyche as well. Everyone begins to think alike. Humanity becomes all the same—there are no more wars, but no more individuality, no diversity, and no creativity.

Sf play (unpublished):

“Le Radar de la vérité” [The Truth Radar] or “La Machine à dire la vérité” [The Truth-Telling Machine]. The scientist-inventor André creates a machine in the form of a female robot (Vera) that will always tell the truth. But she answers only in numbers and cannot predict the future. The government offers to purchase Vera in order to use it/her for military purposes—i.e., to know how many aircraft the Australasians are building, etc.—but André adamantly refuses to sell Vera. The government destroys both André and his invention with a nuclear weapon.

Modern anthology:

*Joyeuses Apocalypses*. Paris: Bragelonne, 2009. Contains three novels by Spitz (*La Guerre de mouches*, *L'Homme élastique*, and the previously unpublished *La Guerre mondiale #3*), six short stories (“Après l'ère atomique,” “Le Nez de Cléopâtre,” “Interview d'une soucoupe volante,” “L'Énigme du V51,” “Les Vacances du Martien,” and “Le Secret des microbes”), and a critical postface by Joseph Altairac (see below).

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#### ABSTRACT

Jacques Spitz (1896-1963) was the most important writer of French science fiction during the 1930s and 1940s. An engineer by profession and heavily influenced by Surrealism, Spitz specialized in sf narratives combining end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it catastrophes with highly realistic detail and black-humor satire. His most famous sf novels—most of which are not available in English—include *L'Homme élastique* [The Elastic Man, 1938], *La Guerre des mouches* [The War of the Flies, 1938], *Les Signaux du soleil* [Signals from the Sun, 1943], and *L'Oeil du purgatoire* [The Eye of Purgatory, 1945]. In the history of French science fiction, Spitz was one of the last of a handful of pioneering sf authors in France who, during the early decades of the twentieth century, began to break away from the popular *extraordinary voyage* narrative recipe of Jules Verne and—following in the speculative footsteps of H.G. Wells, J.-H Rosny aîné, and Maurice Renard—experimented with a host of new sf variants.